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Writer knew what she wanted but it took a secret sci-fi life to achieve her dreams

The man in the mirror

James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon
Julie Phillips
St. Martin's Press
469 pp., $37.95

Review by DEBBY WALDMAN

James Tiptree Jr. burst onto the science fiction scene in the 1960s with a string of hard-edged, provocative stories. For nearly 10 years, no one knew Tiptree's true identity.

The only child of wealthy Canadian-born lawyer Herbert Bradley and his wife, Mary, Alice Bradley Sheldon lived a life of privilege in a grand house in Chicago, attended to by servants and governesses. Her parents' parties were the talk of the town, with guests including Carl Sandburg, Sinclair Lewis and Somerset Maugham.

Mary was an award-winning writer whose work was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker* and other popular magazines. She also wrote adult novels and children's stories, the latter of which she had Alli illustrate.

From a young age, Alli was treated to fabulous adventures. She was six years old the first time she accompanied her parents to Africa. The trip was organized by family friend Carl Akeley, a famed naturalist and hunter who had already travelled to Africa and returned with elephants, which are still on display at both the Field Museum in Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

For this visit, in 1921, Akeley wanted to film and collect rare mountain gorillas, which required a rugged expedition to the eastern Congo, an area Phillips describes as "accessible in about the same sense that the top of Mount Everest is now."

Chicago editorial writers questioned the fitness of a mother who would bring a child on such a trip, but Mary was determined to experience deepest, darkest Africa and nothing could stop her — although she did make one concession: "To prove she was a good mother, Mary would have to do her best, not only to protect her daughter, but to raise an exemplary girl. She could have adventures, but only if Alice would compensate for them with white dresses, blond curls, a pretty face, and her best behaviour," Phillips writes in this meticulously researched and thoughtful biography.

It's a big burden for a child to bear, living out her parents' dreams, and Alli was too curious, intelligent and independent to go along with it. Growing up, she knew she didn't want the life her mother had mapped out for her — to become an artist, marry a wealthy man, settle down and raise a family — but it took her until well into her 50s until she figured out what she did want to do.

During those years she married twice, served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, worked for the CIA and earned a PhD in experimental psychology. It was after she earned her graduate degree that Alli realized what she really wanted was to write science fiction. But instead of using her own name, she created a pseudonym, James Tiptree Jr., inspired in part by a name she saw on a jar of jam at her local supermarket.

As Tiptree, Alli published dozens of stories and novels. "He was a brilliant and original talent, with a voice like no one else's: knowing, intense, utterly convinced of its authority and the urgency of its message," writes Phillips, who goes into great and convincing detail analyzing not just Tiptree's stories, but his place in the world of science fiction, and the psychology that drove a privileged woman to create a new identity to achieve success.

Tiptree's work appeared in anthologies and won prestigious prizes. He struck up long-running epistolary relationships with a number of writers, among them Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison.

As his work became more widely read, there were rumblings that he was as much a fiction as the words he wrote. Some people speculated he was Henry Kissinger, or even J.D. Salinger. The truth didn't come out, though, until fans pieced it together after reading Mary Bradley's obituary in 1976.

According to Phillips, Alli's fans didn't mind — and some weren't even surprised — to learn he was a she. She continued to write as Tiptree and also as Raccoona Sheldon, her female pseudonym. But she never regained the spark she'd had when Tiptree was a secret. In a fit of frustration in the summer of 1978, she threw her writing into a wood stove. Her husband tried to rescue it, but he was too late. In a letter to Le Guin after the incident, Alli wrote, "I am trying to become nothing."

It's a sad statement from a woman who had so much going for her but never appreciated her gifts and never truly felt at peace with herself. Phillips does a fine job showing the many sides of Alli — her deep insecurities, conflicts about gender and sexuality, erratic mood swings, passion and her drive to create something important.

Although Alli achieved her greatest success as a science fiction writer, it's a testament both to her magnetic personality and Phillips's ability to make sense of the many facets of her life, that her story will appeal to an audience far beyond those she reached as Tiptree.

Debby Waldman is an Edmonton author and reviewer

Bantock eyes mythic lore in tackling life's big issues

PAT BURKETTE
For CanWest News Service
VANCOUVER

Your average young woman doesn't get simultaneously wooed by four heavenly hunks, but Ana Dijio isn't a typical 19-year-old and *Windflower* (Raincoast Books, 224 pp.), the illustrated book that tells her tale, isn't a typical novel.

Yet all of this is typical for Nick Bantock, whose *Griffin and Sabine* series morphed fiction into adult picture books.

Ana is a dancer whose tribe, the Capelan, once worshipped wind gods and wandered the globe but now live in a village of rundown caravans. She flees an arranged marriage to search for Felix Buleria, a dancing teacher in the city of Serona. She hopes he can teach her a special dance, traditionally used to lead her tribe to new homelands, that will move them to be vagabonds again.

Enter those heavenly hunks, named Sirocco, Boreo, Zephyr and Hamatan. Each tries to win Ana as she pursues her quest. Sirocco whispers in a fiddler's ear and suddenly the man is playing for Ana like Yehudi Menuhin. Vulcanologist Boreo takes her down a dark cave, which he describes as "the underworld." Zephyr gives Ana a taste for flight by launching her in a catapult.

And board his boat, The Mistral, Hamatan shows off his water-driven musical instruments.

Not your idea of divine dates? That's where you're wrong. The four suitors, and Ana, are the stuff of myth, which is what *Windflower* is. They're archetypes, as befits storytelling that's more about life's big questions than individual angst.

"In classical Greek storytelling, it's not the characters we're obsessed with. The characters are carrying an ideal," Bantock said in a recent interview on B.C.'s Saltspring Island, where he now lives with partner Jenn Grieg.

Consider Sirocco's timely take on street people. He calls them "the tribes of one," individuals who can't or won't unite in a single voice and thus are rendered powerless.

Then there's what Bantock calls *Windflower*'s "visual narrative," a wildly creative, modern interpretation of the ancient frieze. The visual narrative looks like a unique watercolour painting on the bottom third of each of *Windflower*'s 224 pages, with colours ranging from soft golds and tans to more vibrant greens and blues, and patterns from nature, like the veins of leaves.

"We have the story, and the dream film that runs beneath it," Bantock said of this melding of text and image. "It's stream of unconsciousness, instead of stream of consciousness."

He drew the black images with graphite pencil on white paper and laid them over 80 12-by-five-inch background colour panels painted with acrylics, inks and chalk pastels. "Then the whole thing was gently Photoshopped so images would seep up into the print above."

Taken together, the images are tour de force modern myth-making, proving that, like the ancient Greeks, we're still searching for answers about life.

Such cultural connections are familiar ground for the author of *Griffin and Sabine*. But fans will find that *Windflower*'s art is much subtler. Chapters are longer than letters and alternate between the third- and the first-person (Ana's) voice. And instead of long-distance love, there are sex scenes.

This time out, Bantock credits pal Edoardo Ponti, son of Carlo Ponti and Sophia Loren, with co-author status because the two were discussing the nature of love when Bantock got the idea for *Windflower*. He wrote the book on his own, while Ponti hopes to turn it into a film some day.

The men also travelled to Barcelona together. Although some of the city found its way into Serona, Bantock leaves *Windflower*'s setting up to the imagination.

"I feel a kind of rightness there. I identify with the landscape and the way the people carry themselves."

Nick Bantock

Manguel ponders the lives of stories

The Library at Night
Alberto Manguel
Knopf
374 pp., $35

Review by JOSE TEODORO

Manguel

Written with the same well-honed thematic structure and steady tumbling of stories and musings that characterized his previous books *A History of Reading* and *Reading Pictures*, Alberto Manguel's *The Library at Night* lights upon the multitude of purpose, meaning and presence of libraries, whether public, personal or virtual. That Manguel approaches this task with such consistent succinctness and humility is all the more impressive when weighed against the obviously obsessive nature of his love for the written word and the ways he regards it as a mirror of self and society.

So fluid, rich and consistent is *The Library at Night* that it's difficult to know where to begin discussing it. It is not an organized history of libraries, nor does it place any judgments on what libraries should contain — Manguel's particular bibliophilia stands as the very antithesis of a canon. Clearly, the book is designed not as a source of knowledge desired and systematically sought out but rather knowledge discovered. It separates what Virginia Woolf, as cited by Manguel, identified as "the learned man" from "the reader," those searching for "some particular grain of truth upon which he has his heart set" from those consumed by "the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading."

Being so well-equipped to free-associate on the notions of the library as myth, shape, workshop, island and imagination, Manguel shifts across time, geography and literature itself to tell us about the library of Alexandria, the cave archives that lay along the Great Silk Road, the lost libraries of the Aztecs, the objects placed within the imagined library of Captain Nemo, the labyrinthine library of Aby Warburg, the Baghdad libraries ransacked after the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and, of course, Manguel's own library, built upon his property in France, a place which he describes as somehow transforming fundamentally every time day turns to night.

As implied in the title, the dictates of light and shadow help give shape to Manguel's views. This binary approach to considering the lives of stories is most eloquently realized in Manguel's description of the daylight hours spent within his library and the nocturnal ones spent outside it, sitting at night below trees with friends, conjuring tales: "In the light, we read the inventions of others; in the darkness, we invent our own stories." As much as Manguel near-fetishizes the binding of paper and ink, his thoughts still luxuriate in the non-place of literature only dreamed.

And that dream extends, inevitably, to the role of the Internet in the collecting and cataloguing of mankind's single, great, extant, ongoing library. Manguel is by turns excited, suspicious and unconcerned about the Web, whose omnipresence is both an obstruction to "pure and disinterested reading" and an as-yet-defined well of literary access, a phantom library that, "like the definition of God in the twelfth century, sees itself as a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." It is a force that stands to redefine our relationship to text and knowledge, but one Manguel sees as having little chance of replacing books, just as the invention of photography didn't bring painting to an end but rather renewed it.

I certainly can't imagine anyone reading *The Library at Night* and not renewing their own declaration of love for books as objects, artefacts and looking-glasses, or even, as Manguel finally proposes, a kind of consolation.

José Teodoro is a former Edmonton playwright now based in Toronto

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